

Who is the Ideal Jewish Leader?

Mr. Patience vs. **MR. ACTION**

Mr. Cool vs **MR. HOT-UNDER-THE COLLAR**

Aaron vs. Moses

Ki Tisa 5777 – Temple Beth El, Stamford CT

וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה עַל-פְּנֵיו, וַיִּקְרָא, **Exodus 34:6** And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed: 'The LORD, the LORD, God, merciful and אֱלֹהֵי רַחוּם וְחַנוּן--אֲרֻךְ אַפִּים, וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת. gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth;

זֶכֶר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֵפִים, נִשְׂא עֹן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאתָה; וְנִקָּה Keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin

“The only ones able to bend a mob to their will are the ones willing to stoop to its level and pander to its tastes.” *(In other words, there is no convincing a mob unless you let it convince you. If you take their position, they’ll agree with you.)* Ahad Ha-Am

“When the people of Israel started to do that deed (of the Golden Calf), they first went to Hur and said to him, ‘Come make a god for us.’ (Hur was put in charge along with Aaron in Exodus 24 – and never heard from again). When he did not do as they said, they went and killed him...Afterward they went to Aaron and said to him, “Come make us a god.” When Aaron heard, he took fright, as it is said, “And Aaron was afraid and he built an altar in front of it.” Leviticus Rabbah 10:3

Seen in this light, Aaron’s actions seemed not only reasonable, but almost heroic. Wishing to spare the Israelites further sin, he cooperated with their plan; then, when Moses came down from the mountain, Aaron told him nothing of Hur’s murder and the Israelites’ threats against him, instead pretending that no one was really responsible. Indeed, Aaron’s willingness to preserve harmony at almost any cost may have contributed to this post biblical reputation as a peacemaker. James Kugel

Hillel said, “Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving other people and leading them to the Torah.” Pirke Avot 1:12

Look at the differences in they styles of leadership of Moses and Aaron.

Where would you place each on the following continua?

In your opinion, where is the best place to be on each continuum?

Where would you place yourself on each continuum?

Denies responsibility for his followers actions

Accepts responsibility for his followers actions

Has low expectations of himself and others

Has high expectations of himself and others

Plays it safe: wants to be liked and accepted

Is willing to risk losing the people's love

Willing to compromise

Unwilling to compromise

Gets angry quickly and easily

Is very patient

Wavers, can't make decisions

Acts quickly and decisively

Summary:

God commands Moses to take a census of the Israelites, with each person paying a half shekel as an offering to be used for the service of the Tent of Meeting. God also tells Moses to make a copper washbowl and stand for the priests to use when they enter the Tent of Meeting and to make a special oil for anointing the Tent, the Ark, and Aaron and his sons. Bezalel and Oholiab are made the chief artisans of the project and priestly vestments. Then, Moses instructs the people to observe the Sabbath forever as a sign of the covenant with God. All this God says to Moses on Mount Sinai.

When God finishes, Moses is presented with two tablets on which are inscribed the laws.

But the people waiting below have grown impatient, waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain. They ask Aaron to make a god to lead them. Aaron takes their gold jewelry and fashions a golden calf. The next day he declares a festival and the people offer sacrifices to the calf as they dance before it.

On the mountain, God tells Moses that the people have turned astray and threatens to destroy them and make of Moses' descendants a great nation. Moses pleads with God to spare the people and recall the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God agrees.

Then Moses descends and, in his anger at seeing the calf, smashes the tablets of the law. After the people have been punished and have repented, Moses again pleads for forgiveness. God appears to him at the top of Mount Sinai and Moses renews the covenant, staying there for forty days. When he descends, Moses' face is radiant because he has spoken with God. The Israelites are frightened by his radiance. Because of this, Moses wears a veil over his face except when he is speaking to God or speaking God's words to the Israelites.

Issues:

1) Distressed by the absence of Moses and no tangible evidence of God's presence, the people demand that Aaron make a visible god for them. One might ask how Aaron could give in so easily. Some legends try to white-wash his reputation by indicating that Aaron was trying to stall for time while Moses returned.

What kind of leader was Aaron? Disraeli said, "We live in an age of prudence. The leaders now generally follow." Do you agree?

If you had been one of the Israelites in the wilderness, would you have been content to wait for Moses?

2) The question most asked about this portion is: Of all generations, how could this one, which witnessed so many miracles first-hand, lose faith after a mere forty days of waiting?

Perhaps the tabernacle (which is mentioned at the beginning of the portion and in the next portion), is God's concession to the idea that people need a tangible sense of God's "physical" presence among them. Do we? In a sense, the Sabbath is an extension of the tabernacle, a day in which the Sacred "dwells" among us.

Or maybe it was something else entirely. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin suggests that the people were reacting against the "severe" and "restrictive" religious legislation Moses had just imposed on them, choosing instead to engage in an orgy. (32:6 - "And they rose to make merry.")

-- If this was so, did the people have a fair understanding of Judaism? How does this correspond to the way people look at Judaism today? Does Judaism allow enough opportunity for "making merry"?

3) Aware that their destruction is imminent, Moses pleads for the lives of the Israelites. The Midrash relates that Moses reminds God of their good deeds. God replies, "Your people have become corrupt." Moses then asks, "Why, when they are good, do you call them "My people," but when they are bad you call them "your" (Moses') people? You should always call them "My" people." Moses closes his argument by reminding God of the promises made to the patriarchs.

-- Can you think of other instances in the Bible where an individual has pleaded with God to save a group of people? Was the argument successful? What was the persuasive point? Have you ever stood up for a person accused of misbehavior?

4) The radiance of Moses' face is indicated by the Hebrew word "keren," which was incorrectly translated into the Latin as "horned." That's why Michaelangelo's famous sculpture shows Moses having two small horns on his head.

5) In this portion, several letters are written extra large in the Torah scroll: 34:7 - the nun, so that will not be mistaken for an ayin, thus creating the word "atzar," "stop"; and 34:14, the resh, so that it won't be confused with a daled, thus creating the word "ehad," "one." Read the verses carefully to understand why this is done, and why, for Jews, each letter of the Torah is of ultimate significance.

-- This section is, by the way, read on fast days, on the High Holidays and often throughout the year. Do you recognize it?

6) The half shekel tax was the means used to indirectly conduct a census. Rabbis have commented that this shows how each individual, no matter how rich or poor, is valued equally by the Lord. But why a half shekel, and not a whole one? One possibility: As an indication that no individual is complete in and of him/herself. Only within a community can one be whole.

7) A few years ago, archaeologists unearthed a golden calf in Ashkelon, Israel, dating from about 1550 BCE. Calf images were common in Canaanite worship, and even in forms of Israelite cult. The story recounted here can be looked at as part of a political power struggle taking place much later on, at a time when the Torah was first written down, between various priestly parties. Some wanted to give Aaron a bad name. See the book "Who Wrote the Bible" for more background.

8) Explore the concept of repentance (teshuvah) in this portion. Even God relents here, reversing a punishment already pronounced. No action, apparently, is too great to deny the possibility of honest, heartfelt, remorse.

9) "All the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears." (32:3) In Hebrew, "their" is in the masculine, indicating, according to the Midrash, that the women did not cooperate. They are therefore not responsible for the sin of the Golden Calf.

-- In questions of faith, is there a "feminine" perspective that differs from the "masculine" perspective most often presented in our sources? Do women believe differently from men? Would a female rabbi have different priorities? The same could be asked of a female President, journalist, senator or Supreme Court justice.